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ABSTRACT

The learning disabilities support program at the University of Michigan was evaluated in a multiple case study with 11 students with learning disabilities (10 males and 1 female and aged 19 to 24 years). The program includes a structured format that focuses on individual needs within specific courses. It employs scaffolding and training of learning skills and cognitive strategies to build a student's academic expertise. Each student is assigned a learning specialist with whom he meets twice a week for predicting problem areas, resolving time management conflicts, taking action, and providing feedback. Action steps are of four basic types: academic scheduling, development of learning skills, tutoring, and testing (arrangement of special accommodations). Evaluation indicates that the program has enabled the students to succeed academically. Further, four components: university policy; self awareness; time management; and accommodation (in the areas of learning skills, content, and testing), are identified as the key factors contributing to program success. Four references. (DB)

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IMPLEMENTING AND EVALUATING A PROGRAM FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Eleven students with Learning Disabilities (LD) are examined in a multiple case study of a university LD program. The purpose is to examine how the academic needs of the students are met and whether these students are able to achieve academic success in a competitive environment.

The program includes a structured format that focuses on individual needs within specific courses. It employs scaffolding and training of learning skills and cognitive strategies to build a student's academic expertise.

The results indicate that the program has enabled the students to succeed academically. Further, four components, university policy, self awareness, time management, and accommodation are identified as the key factors contributing to success.

INTRODUCTION

During the past ten years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students with learning disabilities in colleges and universities (Vogel, 1985). Many highly competitive schools now have special admissions procedures and programs to meet the needs of learning disabled (LD) students. At the University of Michigan, a structured program is utilized to help students labelled LD adjust and succeed. This program includes a statement of formal policy as well as a standard process for dealing with students. However, because LD is a heterogeneous label, the needs of the students are addressed on an individual basis to ensure the best educational support. A model addressing the cognitive, educational and developmental needs of individuals identified as having LD provides the basis for the program described here (Hagen, & Kamberelis, 1990). In this multiple case study, eleven students labelled LD are examined to evaluate the success of the program.

METHODS

Subjects:

The subjects are ten males and one female between nineteen and twenty-four years of age, two black and nine white, all from lower-middle to middle class families, and all but one enrolled in the same unit within the university. Nine of the eleven subjects were identified as LD early in their public school careers (between first and sixth grade), and all received special education services throughout their secondary education. See Table 1.

Procedures:

Once a student has been admitted and designated LD through university policy s/he is referred to the program coordinator. During an initial coordination session the student's background is reviewed and informal assessments of his/her learning disabilities and projected needs are made. Generally, a student is then expected to meet twice each week with his/her assigned learning specialist (LS). While these planning sessions may be quite short they are

important in predicting problem areas, resolving time management conflicts and sustaining personal contact. The student, with consultation from the LS, sets the agenda for each meeting; it is his/her needs and wants that guide the content of the session. It is also in these meetings that appropriate action steps are formulated. These steps are of four basic types:

- **Academic Scheduling** -- This step involves a consideration of present classes, making changes if deemed necessary, as well as selecting new classes each semester.

- **Learning Skills**-- Scaffolded instruction, reciprocal teaching and training of cognitive strategies are used to aid the student in gaining learning skills.
- **Tutoring** -- Content instruction and relevant extra tutoring is provided to the student.

- **Testing** -- Special accommodations such as additional time, oral administration or dictated answers are arranged and implemented to assess student's achievement independent of his/her disability.

Another important part of the system is feedback. Each student's achievement is monitored by his/her LS and adjustments are made if needed. Further, the program relies on communication and coordination among the program staff, an academic advisor, professors and teaching assistants.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

While each of these steps plays an important role in helping the student to succeed, one key component has been the Learning Skills step. In this step students are trained and scaffolded in the

use of learning strategies using current class assignments as the focus (Palincsar, & Brown, 1984; Deschler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1984). Skills such as those involved in reading, composition, time management, and note taking are discussed and practiced. The student is gradually expected to accomplish increasing degrees of expertise in each area. As the student is able to demonstrate ability, responsibility for that aspect of the task is released to the student, and new skills are addressed.

Throughout these learning sessions the five areas described by Weiner (1986) are used for predicting problems. These areas include *Classroom Demands*, *Written Work*, *Test Taking*, *Note Taking* and *Gaining Information From Text*. Further, her forms designed to elicit learning skills were adapted into new worksheets. For example, drawn from *Written Work*, questions 1 through 4 are aimed at leading the student to more productive time management habits.

1.When is the assignment due?

2.How much time do you have to complete the assignment?

3.How are you going to get started?

4.Do you have a time management plan for writing the assignment?

Other questions, such as 5 and 6, focus the student on trying to predict and remedy writing difficulties.

5.What areas of the assignment do you think will give you the most trouble?

6.How will knowing what gives you trouble change the way that you attack the assignment?

These questions are asked by the LS and then discussed with the student. Information on what strategies the student is utilizing and modelling of appropriate responses helps to give the student control over his/her learning skills.

Another important component has been the acceptance of the LD label by the students themselves. During the coordinating session and early on in the program the student is given "ownership" of the LD label and must face being different. The student is often given an independent study course which includes a critical evaluation of what being labelled LD means. This component has led the student to a better acceptance and understanding of himself/herself and a determination to continue.

CONCLUSIONS

One can see that most of the students are doing quite well. Grade point averages reflect successful achievement and the students have all made large strides in writing (composition) and to a lesser extent in reading comprehension. Further, comparing students across different stages of the program, one sees a gradual increase in autonomy over the four to five years of school. While some second and third year students require meeting with an LS and continuing use of planning and action sessions, most need only the testing accommodations. Fourth year students often do not require working with an LS but only require tutorial help on specific content or writing assignments. The important question then becomes: What allows these students to succeed? Or, perhaps more importantly, what aspects of the university's program have contributed to their success?

The key factors are:

- **Policy**
  - -An affirmative university policy that allows for faculty and staff understanding and support through the many difficulties that arise.

•Self-Awareness

-The self-knowledge and determination displayed by students when they are aware of their deficits and especially their strengths allows them to achieve.

•Time Management

-Help in areas from scheduling of classes to management of study times and techniques allows the students to make a gradual adjustment to new academic demands.

•Accommodation

-Learning Skills: Students with LD are challenged more than ever before and build a new bank of learning skills that are both sensitive to their particular disabilities and effective academically.

-Content: Special instruction allows the student to make up content deficits caused by lack of previous skills or opportunities to learn.

-Testing: Students are able to demonstrate achievement independent of their disability.

Together these factors allow the students to make the transfer from high school to the challenging environment of a competitive university.

TABLE 1: Summary Information on Students

		S_1	S_2	S_3	S_4	S_5	S_6	S_7	S_8	S_9	S_{10}	S_{11}*
Year in Program		4**	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	1	1	1
Age (yrs)		24	21	21	22	21	21	21	20	19	19	21
High School GPA		1.60	2.20	2.30	2.24	2.60	2.24	2.20	2.4	2.9	2.3	3.6
WISC-R/ WAIS-R	**Verbal**	81	--	113	--	95	86	--	110	110	111	99
	Performance	96	--	93	--	98	98	--	110	114	108	100
	Full	85	--	104	--	94	91	--	111	113	111	100
SAT/ACT	**M/Raw**	310	16	22	16	23	16	400	520	570	450	--
	V/Percentile	290	36	69	30	74	24	450	530	660	550	--
	Overall	600						850	1050	1230	1000	--
DRP	**Percentile**	41	30	16	19	17	6	--	--	90	--	--
U of M GPA		2.5	2.5	2.8	2.2	2.0	2.4	2.4	2.1	3.0	2.7	3.1

*S_{11} is the only female subject.

**S_1 graduated in April 1990.

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